



Effective Vocabulary Instruction



Vocabulary encompasses all of the words we know and use when listening and speaking, as well as all of the words we know and use in print when reading and writing (Stahl & Nagy, 2006). The goal of vocabulary instruction, a crucial component of teaching reading in K–3 and beyond, is to help students learn the meanings of many words so they can communicate effectively and achieve academically (Nagy & Herman, 1987).

Effective vocabulary instruction requires us to create many opportunities for students to learn words, related concepts, and their meanings. Exposing students to many words at the surface level is not enough (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Stahl & Nagy, 2006; Graves, 2006). Students need strong instructional opportunities to help them develop deep levels of word knowledge and to build their personal lexicons or cognitive storehouses of words. This brief provides an overview of research-based practices for powerful vocabulary instruction—the type of instruction that can propel all students, including English language learners (ELLs) and those at-risk for reading difficulties, to deepen their word knowledge and enrich their language use in speaking and reading.

Our knowledge of words... determines how we understand texts, how we define ourselves for others, and how we define the way we see the world (Stahl, 1999).

Teaching Vocabulary—What the Research Tells Us

Words are the foundation of learning. Multiple exposures to conversations, discussions, and listening to narrative and expository texts read aloud enrich children’s knowledge of how words communicate ideas. Many children amaze us with their language use, overflowing with words, concepts, and ideas; many others, having never been exposed to a language-rich world, are limited in their ability to communicate (Hart & Risley, 1991, 2003).

Upon entering school, students typically add between 2,000 and 4,000 words a year to their reading vocabularies, or approximately 17 words each day (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Graves, 2006; Nagy & Herman, 1987; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Students entering school with limited vocabularies need to add an even greater number of words to catch up with their peers.

Educators can help students bridge that gap by providing both direct and incidental vocabulary instruction. Students need interactions with rich language, the printed word, and teachers who provide targeted, differentiated vocabulary instruction (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000). Teaching vocabulary explicitly and daily at each grade level and targeting key academic terms and high-utility vocabulary words can make meaningful differences in each child’s vocabulary and future academic success (Chall & Conard, 1991; Chall & Dale, 1995; Hart & Risley, 1991, 2003; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 2000; White, Graves, & Slater, 1990).

VOCABULARY AND THE READING PROCESS

Students who have strong oral vocabularies appear to have a distinct advantage during phonemic awareness and phonics lessons. These students are more familiar with the words and their individual sounds and corresponding letters (Goswami, 2001; Metsala & Walley, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000). Research documents the strong link and reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Baker et al., 1998; Beck et al., 2002; Nagy, 2007; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1987). In addition, students who do not understand some words in texts tend to have difficulty comprehending and learning from those texts. Vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten and first grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Graves, 2006).

VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLs)

Research on ELLs also indicates that vocabulary knowledge predicts academic achievement across the curriculum (Saville-Troike, 1984; Snow & Kim, 2007). Characterized by reduced contextual support (i.e., pictures, facial expressions, gestures), academic English—the language of books, the classroom, and schools—is critical for students to understand challenging texts and content-area textbooks, solve mathematical word problems, and take tests (Cummins, 1984). ELLs face challenges because they often lack the academic English vocabulary necessary for understanding and learning from texts (Dutro & Moran, 2003; García, 1991; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Verhoeven, 1990). They may converse with classmates in English and understand and respond correctly to teacher questions, but still lack proficiency in

academic language skills, which can take 5 to 7 years to develop fully (Cummins, 2003; Graves, 2006). Explicit vocabulary instruction in academic terminology and sophisticated vocabulary is one way teachers can help close the vocabulary gap between ELLs and their English-dominant peers, while benefitting all students (Blachowicz, Fisher, & Watts-Taffe, 2005; Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1987; Carlo et al., 2004; Graves, 2006; Snow & Kim, 2007).

Components of Effective Direct Vocabulary Instruction

Effective vocabulary instruction incorporates both direct (explicit) and less direct (incidental) approaches (Baker et al., 1995; Beck et al., 2002; Biemiller, 2004; Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004; Marzano, 2004; Nagy, 2005; Stahl, 1999). We will examine examples of both approaches: First, we will look at direct vocabulary instruction: specific words and independent word-learning strategies. Then, we will explore indirect approaches: high-quality, rich language experiences and word consciousness, and wide reading.

To expand and accelerate vocabulary growth, students need explicit instruction in the words they will encounter frequently in textbooks and other print materials and media (Beck et al., 2002; Beck et al., 2005; Beck et al., 2007; Stahl et al., 1986).

Determining which words to teach and how to teach them are important decisions that affect vocabulary instruction. Not all vocabulary words require the same level (depth) of instruction. Students need to know some words deeply and others only at the surface level. In addition, the students in a classroom can represent a wide range of language experiences and vocabulary knowledge. Because of the immense number of words that young students need to learn, selecting appropriate words for direct instruction is critical.

Teachers who design their vocabulary instruction purposefully can target specific words that will enhance their students' vocabularies. They select and emphasize each vocabulary word relative to its importance to understanding the text, its frequency across texts and subject areas, and their students' knowledge of that particular word.

LEVELS OF WORD KNOWLEDGE

Helping students acquire sophisticated levels of word knowledge and the ability to use those words to communicate is a main goal of daily vocabulary instruction. But learning new vocabulary words is not a simple "known" or "unknown" phenomenon (Biemiller, 2004; Graves, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). One's background knowledge and experience play critical roles in determining where a word falls along the continuum of word knowledge (see Table 1).

Table 1: Levels of Word Knowledge

Level 1	Unknown ("I've never heard that word before.")
Level 2	Knowledge that the word exists ("I've heard the word before.")
Level 3	Partial knowledge ("I have a general understanding of the word.")
Level 4	Complete knowledge ("I can define the word and use it correctly.")

Chall, 1983; Dale, E. 1965; Scott et al., Nagy, 2000; Stahl, 1999



Teachers tap into their students' knowledge of words and related concepts. They conduct a quick survey of their students' knowledge of preselected vocabulary words before instruction.

First, teachers pronounce the words and have students repeat them—a critical step in learning and remembering words. Next, they ask their students to rate each word on a scale from 1 to 4. Students hold up one finger if they have never heard the word, two fingers if they have heard it before, three fingers if they know a little about it, and four fingers if they can define and use it in a sentence. Teachers tally student responses on the board and discuss the results.

Teachers know that determining students' word knowledge prior to reading instruction is invaluable. Teachers' understanding of their students' word knowledge informs their vocabulary instruction. They know that "one size does not fit all" when it comes to teaching vocabulary. Based on the data they garner from the quick survey and from observations, teachers know which words require in-depth instruction and which can be quickly reviewed or defined.

TIERS OF VOCABULARY WORDS

To help teachers distinguish which words should be the focus of direct, explicit instruction, Beck and colleagues (2002) classify words into different tiers, or categories (see Table 2).

Table 2: Tiers of Vocabulary Words

Tier	Description	Examples	Instructional Implications
Tier One	Basic; generally familiar to the majority of students	clock, baby, happy, talk, walk	Rarely require instruction at school
Tier Two	High frequency; high utility; conceptual; generalizes to related known words	coincidence, absurd, industrious, fortunate	Instruction geared toward these words can be productive
Tier Three	Low frequency; specifically connected to a particular domain/content area	isotope, lathe, refinery, peninsula	Best learned when a specific need arises

Beck et al., (2002)

Beck and colleagues (2005) remind teachers that "no formula exists for selecting age-appropriate vocabulary words" (p. 220) and that selecting which words to teach is "a matter of judgment, best decided by those who know the individual students" (p. 221).

With this in mind, teachers should consider that some students may already know some of the more basic or Tier One vocabulary words in a text, including those on a publisher’s preselected list for a particular text or chapter. Tier One words require only a brief explanation of how they are used in a text.

The next level, Tier Two words, are important, useful words that students need to know and understand at a deeper level. Students frequently encounter Tier Two words when listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These words are also critical to students’ understanding different types of text and often include academic vocabulary words (e.g., revise, categorize, discuss) that are used across the curriculum.

Tier Three vocabulary words play a critical role in understanding expository texts and content-area subject matter (e.g., chronological, denominator, habitat). Tier Three words are not used as frequently as Tier Two words and have specialized meanings related to a specific subject, domain, or topic. Understanding the meanings of these words is crucial if students are to understand, learn, and remember content or related information from textbooks and other reading materials.

To “own,” or add words to their productive vocabularies (speaking and writing), students need multiple exposures, typically 12 to 14, to these words across a variety of contexts (Beck et al., 2002; Graves, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Students at high risk for reading difficulties may require even more exposures.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

Students also need to develop academic English vocabulary—the words, terms, and concepts found in school texts and other materials (Marzano, 2004). Teachers establish high expectations for high-quality oral and written language by using academic language in their own speaking and writing while encouraging their students to use such language. Some academic vocabulary words represent new labels for known concepts for many native English learners, but may represent new concepts for ELLs (Graves, 2006).

Many academic vocabulary lists have been developed to help teachers teach subject-specific terms. Schools can use these prepared lists as frameworks for selecting grade-appropriate academic vocabulary that aligns with adopted reading and content-area textbooks and state standards (Marzano, 2004). Table 3 Sample Academic Vocabulary, provides one example of subject-specific academic vocabulary based on grade-level state standards and textbooks.

Table 3: Sample Academic Vocabulary

Subject	Kindergarten	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade
Language arts	date, poem	fantasy, initial	margin, composition	analogy, fable
Math	graph, rectangle	digit, total	fraction, symmetry	addend, data
Science	cloud, insect	environment, shelter	habitat, prehistoric	conservation, force
Social studies	family, holiday	citizen, election	chronological, heritage	consumer, imports

Marzano, 2004

NUMBER OF WORDS TO TEACH

Research does not clearly define the number of words that teachers should teach each day or week. Teachers should base this number on their students' abilities and the cognitive demands of the text or content.



What It Looks Like in the Classroom Selecting Words for Direct Instruction

Teachers carefully plan their vocabulary lessons either individually or in teams. They review the publisher's preselected vocabulary words for the text that will be read, and use their professional judgment as to the importance of these preselected words. They categorize the words into tiers based on their students' word knowledge and abilities.

Teachers preview the text, looking for other words, idioms, and phrases that may be unknown to or confusing for their students. As they identify words, teachers ask themselves:

- 1) How useful is the word? Are students likely to encounter it often in other texts? Will it be of use to students in describing their own experiences?
- 2) How does the word relate to other words and ideas that students know or have been learning? Does it directly relate to a topic of study in the classroom? Will it add a dimension to the ideas that have been developed?
- 3) What does the word bring to a text or situation? What role does it play in communicating the meaning of the context in which it is used?(Beck et al., 2002)

If teachers discover that the text does not contain enough Tier Two words, they add Tier Two words that will expand an important concept or idea about the characters, plot, setting, theme, or topic. For example, a teacher might choose to teach the word "irritable," even though it does not appear in the text. Why? "Irritable" could be used to describe a character who is always in a bad mood and difficult to be around.

Teachers consider their students' ages and abilities and the demands across the curriculum as they narrow down which words to teach. For example, after selecting words she will teach for a reading selection, a teacher considers additional vocabulary words across the weekly curriculum to ensure that her students are not overloaded. She also considers which words are important for comprehending and learning critical content. Based on all of these factors, the teacher makes her final decision about which words she will teach during the reading block and in the content areas.

Teachers then purposefully plan how they will teach the targeted words each day. They build time into the day and over the week or several weeks for cumulative reviews of previously introduced words to ensure that students have multiple exposures (at least 12 to 14 for each targeted word), including opportunities to read and use the words in different contexts. For younger students who are exposed to new targeted words during read-alouds, the teacher uses the targeted words in various contexts across the curriculum and school day.

POWERFUL VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

Knowing a word deeply involves navigating along the word knowledge continuum from understanding what a word means at its basic level to connecting it with other words and concepts to convey a more subtle or sophisticated meaning in a different context.

Researchers agree that multiple exposures to target words are key if teachers want their students to learn words deeply. Providing 12 to 14 opportunities to use new vocabulary actively may overwhelm many teachers with busy schedules, but providing multiple exposures to words is non-negotiable if we want students to build robust vocabularies.

It takes careful planning to provide powerful instruction within the confines of scheduling. Teachers design their vocabulary lessons strategically, creating multiple activities for each set of words, teaching words before students read texts or during teacher read-aloud sessions (Beck et al., 2002; Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005).

READING ALOUD TO STUDENTS

By reading aloud daily to their students, K–3 teachers indirectly expose their students to challenging new words in texts that the students may not be able to read on their own. But teachers can also use read-aloud sessions to teach key vocabulary words and concepts directly to their students. One example of how teachers can directly teach vocabulary during read-aloud sessions is a research-based method called “text talk” (Beck & McKeown, 2001).



What It Looks Like in the Classroom Teaching Vocabulary Words Directly After a Read Aloud

Ms. Cortez, a first-grade teacher, reads a story aloud. As she reads, she pauses and briefly explains (rather than offering a dictionary definition) each teacher-selected vocabulary word. These quickly-paced explanations do not interrupt the flow of the story. The teacher reads, “Using a worn cotton rope, Jake tethered the old boat to a tree on the riverbank.” She immediately stops and says, “‘Tethered’ means the boat was tied to the tree with a rope.” Then she continues to read the text, stopping briefly to explain other vocabulary words using the same procedure. This technique is sometimes referred to as “fast mapping.”

After Ms. Cortez finishes reading the text aloud, she teaches each vocabulary word directly through these steps:

- 1) Clarify the context. Use the context of the story to introduce the word:
“The story tells us that Jake tethered the boat to a tree at the edge of the river when he went to look for food in the woods.”
- 2) Pronounce the word. Write the word on the board. Then, facing the students, pronounce it, enunciating the sounds clearly: “tethered.”

Then say: “Let’s say the word together: ‘tethered.’”

Provide another opportunity for students to say the word by asking:
“What’s the word?”

For ELLs, write the word on the board, dividing it into syllables and placing a stress mark, such as a dot, over the stressed or accented syllable.

- 3) Give a student-friendly explanation. Before the lesson, Ms. Cortez developed student-friendly explanations based on each word’s dictionary or glossary definition. Student-friendly explanations use comprehensible, accessible language. Ms. Cortez realizes that many definitions only “muddy the waters” and hinder comprehension, rather than clarify word meanings. The dictionary definition of tether is “to tie something, especially an animal, with a rope or chain in order to restrict its movement” (Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999). Because this definition uses some easy-to-understand words, Ms. Cortez tries to incorporate them into her explanation. She also tries to include words like “something” or “someone” or describes as she explains the word to her students: “If something is tethered to a tree, this means it is tied with a rope to keep it from going anywhere.” Student-friendly explanations help students make connections between the new word and their prior knowledge.
- 4) Provide different contexts. The teacher uses the word in other contexts than the story: “In the old West, cowboys tethered their horses when they got off them and went inside a house or store. Tying their horses to something when they got off them kept the horses from walking or running away.”
- 5) Actively engage students in activities using the word. Ms. Cortez then provides brief opportunities for students to think about and use each word. Examples of active vocabulary engagement include:

Active Engagement Activity 1: Provide a sentence starter so students have to think about a new word in an expanded context. Say: “I tethered my dog to a light post to keep her from running away while I was in the post office. Think of an example of when someone might tether an animal. Turn and tell your partner. Say: ‘Someone would tether ...’”

Active Engagement Activity 2: Provide several scenarios or situations that include the vocabulary word. Ask students to respond with thumbs up/down, yeas/boos, or response cards to indicate whether a stated situation is an example of the word. Say, “Respond with the word ‘Yes’ if I describe an example of something being tethered.”

- A belt around my waist (no response)
 - A ball tied to a pole (Yes!)
 - A pony tied to a hitching post (Yes!)
 - A fish in an aquarium (no response)
 - An inner tube float tied to a boat (Yes!)
- 6) Pronounce the word again. Ms. Cortez knows that students need to practice saying words over and over to reinforce their phonological properties and meanings: “What is the word that describes something tied to something else with a rope” (tethered)?

Ms. Cortez repeats this procedure as she teaches each vocabulary word.

(Beck et al., 2001; Beck et al., 2002; Diamond et al., 2006).

TEACHING VOCABULARY BEFORE READING TEXT

“Front-loading” vocabulary helps students attend to overall meaning as they read. Then, as students read the selection (e.g., chorally or through echo or partner reading), the teacher stops to refresh students’ memory of previously taught words and ideas. After reading, an in-depth discussion of all the words allows the teacher and students to revisit word use within the context of the passage to promote a greater understanding of words and their meanings (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Beck et al., 2002; Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006).

DEEP PROCESSING OF WORDS

After being taught new vocabulary words, students need more opportunities to think about and internalize the meanings of words. Students need to use the words over and over again to truly “own” them. Teachers continue to review and reinforce previously taught words and develop engaging, thought-provoking questions and activities that require their students to think about vocabulary words and their meanings in a range of contexts.



After reviewing each word's meaning, teachers lead activities, such as the following, to expand students' word knowledge (Beck et al., 2002; Diamond & Gutlohn, 2006; Graves, 2006; Marzano, 2004). In this example, the set of vocabulary words includes "tether" and three other Tier Two words: "dense," "dilapidated," and "trek."

Deep Processing Activity 1: Have students illustrate word meanings. All students, especially ELLs, benefit when they think about what words mean and use a different modality to draw or symbolize word meaning. Illustrations help students personalize word explanations and definitions and often serve as anchors to help students remember word meanings and uses.

Deep Processing Activity 2: Ask students to respond to true/false statements by holding up a response card or by saying: "True" or "False." "Building a sandcastle is an example of a trek on the beach. True or false?" (False) "Riding a horse is one way to tether it." (False) "You can't see very far in a dense fog." (True)

Deep Processing Activity 3: Pose questions using all or some of the vocabulary words to encourage students to think and make connections: a) "Why would someone tether their boat along the river and trek through a dense forest?" b) "Would you describe an old, rundown car as dense or dilapidated? Why?"

Deep Processing Activity 4: Read a sentence and ask students to complete it with the correct vocabulary word: "As we hiked through the ____ forest, the weeds and thorny bushes made the younger children cry out in pain." (dense)

Deep Processing Activity 5: Develop sentences for some of the words. Tell students: "If you think a sentence describes 'dilapidated,' say 'dilapidated': a) From our hotel window, we saw a new skyscraper." (no response) b) "Rain and snow fell through the holes in the roof of the old warehouse." (dilapidated)

Deep Processing Activity 6: Ask students which words go with the phrases that describe them: a) "Which word goes with an old car with no tires or engine?" (dilapidated) b) "Which word goes with a safari in Africa?" (trek)

Deep Processing Activity 7: Ask students to answer "Yes" or "No" to questions that include two vocabulary words: a) "Would it be safe to trek to a dilapidated cabin by yourself?" (no) b) "Could you tether your dog to a post to keep him safe in a dense fog?" (yes)

Deep Processing Activity 8: To promote word ownership, have students record vocabulary words, along with their meanings, examples used in phrases, and illustrations of the words on individual word cards, vocabulary notebooks, or logs. Students should include the words they are learning during direct instruction as well as words they are learning on their own (e.g., through independent reading). Using different sections of the notebooks for each content area may help with this activity. Encourage students to build their word knowledge across the curriculum and to be on the lookout for previously learned words in their reading, conversations, and other daily experiences. Revisit, review, and connect words across the curriculum throughout the school year. Prompt students to examine their growing word knowledge to ensure that they move from a level of basic word recognition to a deeper understanding and appreciation of words and their uses.

Deep Processing Activity 9: Extend vocabulary learning by placing additional practice activities in literacy centers or stations. Include opportunities for students to discuss and work with vocabulary words in pairs or small groups. A variety of vocabulary word sorts, semantic maps, and writing activities can help students make connections between new words and concepts and their existing vocabularies. Categorizing words, by either sorting or mapping, and using new words in their speaking and writing, deepen students' word knowledge.

Components of Effective Indirect Vocabulary Instruction

Teachers also need to use a variety of teaching techniques to develop indirect word-learning strategies such as using context clues, identifying word parts, and dictionary use to help students figure out word meanings on their own (Edwards, Font, Baumann, & Boland, 2004; Graves, 2006).

TEACHING WORD PARTS

Students need to know how to recognize and use information from word parts, such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots, as a strategy for determining word meanings. For example, teaching the most common prefixes and their meanings can increase students' abilities to figure out unknown words independently. Why? Only 20 prefixes account for 97 percent of prefixed words that appear in printed school English (Graves, 2004; Stahl, 1999).

USING CONTEXT CLUES

Context clues are indicators of the meaning of a word. Such clues may be in the sentence that contains the word or somewhere else in the text within close proximity (Stahl, 1999). Context clues include definitions, synonyms, and examples. Teachers model the use of context clues by making connections between the unknown word and the text in which it appears. They also teach students ways to confirm the word's meaning to help them develop a precise understanding of its use.

DICTIONARY USE

Stahl and Nagy (2006) note that teaching students how to use dictionaries is “a complex cognitive strategy that takes years to develop” (p. 183). Teachers must go beyond lessons on alphabetical order and guide words to help their students better understand the structure of dictionary entries. Students need explicit instruction in matching definitions to specific words in a text they are reading. Dictionary use during or after reading words in context is more beneficial than the more traditional practice of supplying definitions or asking students to look words up before reading (Graves, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).



What It Looks Like in the Classroom **Teaching Independent Word-learning**

Teachers help students learn to use word-learning strategies. They explain the value of each strategy and discuss and model when, why, and how a strategy can be used to figure out unknown words that are important to the overall understanding of text. Teachers teach students how to read carefully, modeling frequent pauses in reading to ask: “Is this making sense? Do I understand what the author is saying?”

As a first step, teachers teach their students that good readers often encounter unfamiliar words and use graphophonemic knowledge (phonemic awareness and phonics) to try to pronounce them.

Next, teachers show students how to determine what a word means by using the context surrounding it. They model many times, using a think-aloud process, how to slow down and reread the sentence that contains the unknown word, looking for clues to its meaning (e.g., explanations or synonyms). They also show students how to reread the preceding sentence(s), thinking about what the author is saying.

Teachers also teach students how to figure out what a word means by looking for word parts. They model “chunking” a word into parts to help identify the root or base word and any affixes (prefixes and suffixes). They teach students to think about each individual word part and what they already know about it. Students learn that knowing part of a word can sometimes help them figure out the meaning of the word.

In another instructional approach, teachers teach students to turn to a dictionary, glossary, or other person for help, if none of the strategies above help them figure out the meaning of an unknown word. Teachers model how to read all the definitions in a dictionary or glossary entry, and students learn how to think about a word's context to determine the best definition. Teachers demonstrate how knowledge of a word's context and its definition can help students "put the word to work" in their speaking and writing.

Teachers also teach students a method for checking word meaning after applying a strategy. If students think they have figured out what a word means, they reread the sentence, substituting what they think the word means for the unknown word. If the sentence makes sense, students continue reading. If not, they stop and try the strategies again or ask for help from their teacher or peers (Graves, 2006).

As their students try independent word-learning strategies, teachers provide scaffolding support, when necessary, for individual students. Teachers incorporate plenty of practice using diverse texts. To bring closure to lessons, teachers incorporate a metacognitive component: They encourage their students to reflect on which strategies helped them most in determining word meanings on their own.

HIGH QUALITY ORAL LANGUAGE

The goal of vocabulary instruction is to "equip students with the skills and strategies necessary for lifelong vocabulary development" (Lehr, Osborn, & Hiebert, 2004, p. 3). Teachers need to create an environment that engages students in rich language experiences, so that students become interested in words both in and outside the classroom (Nagy & Scott, 2000).

Promoting high-quality oral language and vocabulary use helps all students bridge the gap between everyday conversation and academic and written language. Many students need intentional and repeated exposure to the type of language found in academic books. ELLs often master conversational English before they master academic English, frequently misleading teachers into assuming that ELLs are more fluent in English than they actually are. It takes between one and two years for ELLs to master conversational English, but at least five to seven years to become proficient in academic English (Cummins, 2003; Graves, 2006).

FOSTERING WORD CONSCIOUSNESS

Word consciousness has been defined as the knowledge of and interest in words (Graves, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). Teachers who share their love of reading and rich language use can motivate students to develop word consciousness. Students need to be encouraged to develop an awareness of the many words all around them.



Teachers read aloud every day and at every grade level because read-aloud sessions help teach vocabulary and call attention to how authors use words.

Teachers model fluent reading in a variety of diverse texts and genres. They stop and think aloud. Modeling thinking aloud as a strategy shows students what good readers do to understand words and ideas in text: “‘One day, Tortoise heard Hare boasting.’ Hmm. I’m not sure what ‘boasting’ means. I think I’ll keep reading to see if that helps me. ‘He told all the animals how he could run faster than anyone else.’ Oh, that sounds like bragging that he was better than everyone else. Boasting must mean bragging.”

Teachers read aloud texts that are too difficult for students to read independently. Why? They know students need to experience challenging words, advanced grammatical structures, and complex language patterns. All are important to broadening their students’ reading and academic vocabularies, including those of ELLs.

Teachers actively engage students in the reading process. Students need to think about and use words to convey ideas, working in pairs or mixed-ability small groups. Teachers and students connect new words with already known concepts; teachers help their students become aware of the subtleties of word meanings and the power of figurative language, idioms, and words with multiple meanings.

Teachers model rich language throughout the school day. They encourage their students to converse using the words that are read to them and the academic words found in their textbooks and other printed materials that surround them.

Teachers encourage students to be “word detectives,” always looking for new uses of vocabulary words, phrases, and other expressions in texts and in the world around them. Collaborative discussions and a focus on the language-rich world around them help young students develop word consciousness. They become excited about learning more words, both in and outside the classroom.

ENCOURAGING WIDE READING

Students learn new words by encountering them in text when they read independently or when text is read to them. The more students read, the more expansive and rich their vocabulary becomes. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Students who find reading difficult tend to read less and fail to build their vocabularies at rates commensurate with their more proficient and prolific reading peers (Stanovich, 1986). Teachers cannot depend on wide reading as a primary tool in increasing these

students' vocabulary knowledge. Rather, more direct approaches of vocabulary instruction, as previously discussed, are vital for these students.

Reading widely means reading a great deal in a variety of texts (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Graves, 2006; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). The power of reading quantity and its impact on vocabulary knowledge has been described as the "largest single source of vocabulary growth" and "essential for increasing students' vocabulary size" (Stahl & Nagy, 2006, pp. 127, 128).



What It Looks Like in the Classroom

Promoting Word Knowledge and Vocabulary Growth Through Wide Reading

In addition to providing structured opportunities for students to select books for independent reading, teachers arrange time for students to read those books. They guide students in selecting books and maintain a system for tracking the books students read. Teachers help students get the most out of their independent reading time. Teachers know that students are more motivated to read and explore new genres and topics when teachers establish high expectations for peer interactions (discussions and sharing sessions) about books that students are reading (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

Teachers also teach comprehension strategies to help students navigate different types of text as they read independently, and routinely schedule structured discussions, along with related writing opportunities, to promote productive wide-reading experiences. Literature circles, partner-sharing book recommendations, and literature response activities are all ways that teachers encourage their students to read widely. Wide reading helps students develop lifelong reading habits, and it positively affects students' overall knowledge of the world as they build their vocabularies (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

For younger students, struggling readers, and older ELLs who are not yet able to read a great deal of text on their own, teachers model wide reading and its importance by incorporating daily read-aloud sessions in a variety of genres. Teachers build students' oral vocabularies and listening comprehension skills by introducing them to a world of words printed on the pages they read.

In Summary

Teachers provide powerful vocabulary instruction and supportive word-learning activities every day. As a result, students are propelled into rich and memorable word-learning experiences that help them: 1) learn specific words; 2) use independent word-learning strategies; 3) develop high-quality, rich language for speaking and writing; 4) become word conscious; and 5) engage in wide reading. Students who develop such word-learning knowledge and abilities through effective vocabulary instruction can leave the classroom well equipped to continue growing a rich vocabulary to learn and communicate ideas.

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Students need strong instruction
to develop deep levels of **word**
knowledge and
build **personal lexicons**—**cognitive**
storehouses of words.



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